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Congress prepares to cut back defense despite televised Reagan bid for more

By Walter Andrews
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Despite President Reagan's televised plea last night for support of an increased defense budget, Congress is preparing to make cuts that would have wide-ranging effects on the military posture of the United States and the non-communist world.

The presidential budget message came as the Pentagon has escalated its warning that the world military balance — while essentially stable — is in danger of tilting once more against the United States unless the Reagan defense buildup continues.

Many in Congress contend, however, that the so-called "decade of neglect" in the 1970s and the buildup of Soviet military forces have been

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overstated. They argue that the Pentagon budget must shoulder its share of the burden as the government grapples with the Gramm-Rudman balanced-budget law.

The extent to which each argument prevails will determine how much of the \$311.6 billion in spending authority the 1987 defense budget is cut in the upcoming congressional debate.

The request represents an 8.2 percent increase, after inflation, over the \$278.4 billion Congress approved for 1986. The fiscal 1986 figure is a 6 percent decrease from 1985, the first reduction in the six-year Reagan buildup.

Congressional savants such as Wisconsin Democratic Rep. Les Aspin, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, and Georgia Democratic Sen. Sam Nunn, ranking minority member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, say the Pentagon will be lucky if its 1987 budget can be held level with this year.

In his annual report to Congress, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger earlier this month said that despite some notable deficiencies in America's military posture, "the strategic balance today is essentially stable."

The modernization of America's arsenal will ensure that this remains the case "provided that Congress allows these [weapons] programs to be completed," Mr. Weinberger said in an "overall assessment" section of his defense posture statement to Congress.

In his commentary, Mr. Weinberger said:

- The NATO alliance "continues to maintain a credible capability to deter a Warsaw Pact attack."

- In Southwest Asia, which includes Iran, Afghanistan and the Middle East, "the balance favors the Soviets, but the long-term trends may shift this trend to our advantage."

- In the Pacific and Asia, the balance also favors the Soviets, "but with our current modernization programs the long-term trends favor us and our Asian allies and friends."

Overall, Mr. Weinberger proclaimed, the world naval balance still favors the United States. With the Soviets building larger and more sophisticated ships such as their first large aircraft carrier, this balance "is becoming increasingly

complex and difficult to assess," he said.

The ability to project power to world trouble spots, either by airlifting troops or moving them by ship, "still favors us, but this is one of the most dynamic areas of Soviet activity," Mr. Weinberger said. Soviet programs to improve their power projection capability will therefore have to be monitored carefully.

Adm. William J. Crowe, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, warned Congress recently that Mr. Reagan's defense buildup is only in mid-stream and that budget cuts would once again allow the Soviets to widen the gap.

"We are at a critical juncture," Mr. Crowe said. "I urge you to stay the course."

The former commander of the Pacific fleet suggested that the Navy might have lost a naval war in Asia five years ago prior to the U.S. defense buildup. Even with the improvements, "the situation is too close to call," the admiral said.

In his report, Mr. Weinberger said when the Reagan administration took office in 1981, the United States was investing only 65 cents in the development and production of new weapons and equipment to every dollar of Soviet investment. The percentage the military takes from the much smaller Soviet gross national product is about double that of the United States.

The defense buildup narrowed the gap to 92 cents for every Soviet dollar in 1984, the report said. By way of comparison, the defense report noted that the United States was investing \$1.40 for every Soviet dollar in 1961 when President Kennedy took office.

If the proposed five-year 1987 to 1992 defense program is fully funded by Congress, which appears unlikely, "the United States will reach approximately equivalent investment levels with the Soviet Union," the defense report said.

Mr. Aspin has raised the question of why all the NATO nations, including the United States, spend more than the Warsaw Pact nations but wind up with less defense. He dismisses the allegation that the apparent greater Warsaw Pact return is based on "slave labor," and suggested greater efficiency and more common weaponry might be the cause.

The Soviets report only a small fraction of their military expenditures. The dollar estimates are based on U.S. intelligence projections of what it would cost to buy an equivalent military capability.

William W. Kaufmann, a former Defense Department consultant on the annual report, questions the validity of the CIA and Defense Intelligence Agency estimates.

"The U.S. intelligence community does not really know the costs of the Soviet military establishment," he said in his recent book, "A Reasonable Defense." Because of pervasive Soviet secrecy, it is extremely difficult to compare Soviet and U.S.

weapons, technology and military capabilities, he said.

Charges in Congress and else-

Continued

where that the Soviet military buildup of the 1970s has been exaggerated "are not difficult to sustain," Mr. Kauffman states.

Even the Pentagon acknowledges that the question of how much defense is enough is difficult and vexing and not subject to glib answers.

"We do not seek to mimic the Soviet Union in spending, or to match them tank for tank, plane for plane, ship for ship," Mr. Weinberger said in his annual defense report. But the global military balance must be maintained because of the effect that the perception of U.S. inferiority has on American allies and the Soviets.

A long-term commitment to maintain this balance "will require us to invest roughly as much in our defenses as our primary military competitor [the Soviet Union] invests in its forces," Mr. Weinberger said.

The gap in logic perceived by Mr. Nunn, Mr. Aspin and others has left Mr. Weinberger open to the charge that he lacks any coherent strategy other than "more [weapons and spending] is better."

Early in the Reagan administration, the Pentagon articulated a strategy of "horizontal escalation" — the ability to deter Soviet aggression in any one trouble spot by having the ability to threaten retaliation in many areas.

This appeared to emphasize a buildup of the long-range strike forces of the Air Force and Navy at the expense of the Army. Horizontal escalation has been lost in the dust of disuse.

In apparent reply to the critics, the defense secretary, in recent months has begun articulating what he calls the "Four Pillars" of defense policy for maintaining the military balance and a stable deterrence into the 1990s and beyond. They are:

- The development of a space-based nuclear missile defense system under the Strategic Defense Initiative and the movement away from reliance on the threat of mutual retaliation to maintain a stable balance.

- The uses of non-nuclear, conventional forces to deter the outbreak of war.

- A strategy for reducing and controlling nuclear arms.

- A so-called "Competitive Strategies" that capitalizes on American advantages, particularly in the area of weapons technology, and exploits Soviet weaknesses.

The fourth pillar seems to be a key addition to what Mr. Weinberger called "our conceptual arsenal."

An example of a competitive strategy cited by defense officials is the Stealth bomber, which uses an advanced technology non-metallic structure to make the aircraft virtually invisible to enemy radar.

The secret "black program," whose budget is not reported to Congress, is considered the key weapon to maintaining America's nuclear lead in the future. Usually informed sources estimate the 1987 Pentagon request for the Stealth bomber at \$1.7 billion, compared to \$1 billion for 1986.

The Soviets are not believed to have the technology to either make their own Stealth plane, or to construct defenses to detect and destroy such an aircraft.

NATO AND SOVIET BLOC WEAPONS PRODUCTION 1975-1987

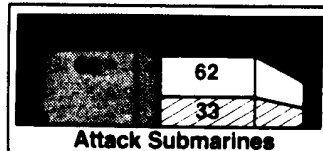
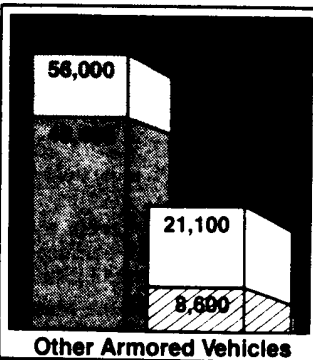
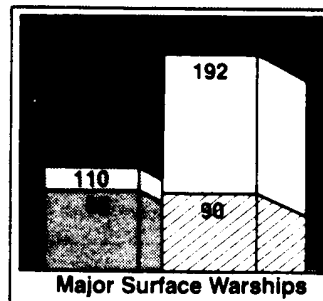
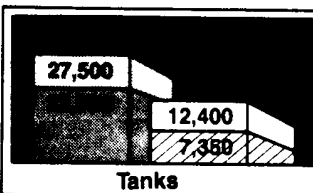
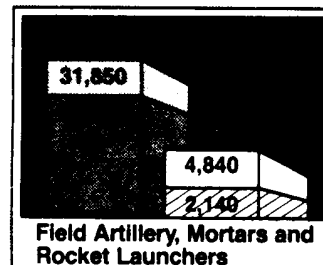
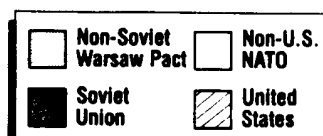
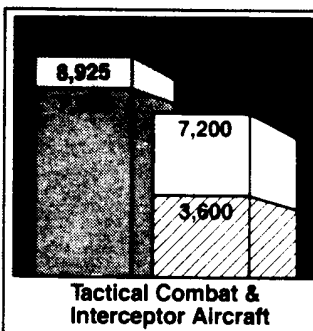


Chart by Ed Haddock The Washington Times